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# **The ‘Speed School’ pedagogy and how it unlocks the creative and learning potential of disadvantaged children in Ethiopia**

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## **Abstract**

Several research studies have shown that many disadvantaged children leave school or never attend for different reasons, the key ones being poverty, child labour, distance to schools, over-age attendance, nomadic or pastoralist life styles, gender – where girls’ poor attendance or access is linked to cultural/religious factors or gender-insensitive school environments, ill health and disability leading to inconsistent attendance, and loss of one or both parents leaving children without household support for their education (Hunt 2008; Akyeampong et al., 2007). However, schools can also intentionally or unintentionally ‘push’ disadvantaged children out through unresponsive pedagogy which excludes them from much of the learning process. Many such children are usually assumed to be the least educable, from poor and often illiterate families and having come late to schooling or at least had their education disrupted. Their disadvantaged backgrounds often compromise their readiness to learn. Unlike traditional pedagogical practices in many African classrooms, which are characterised by strong teacher-centred teaching, a pedagogy developed in an accelerated learning programme (ALP) known as the ‘Speed School’ programme in Ethiopia, demonstrates potential to give such children more control over how they learn. This paper discusses how the pedagogy promotes strong student engagement in the learning process, which unlocks the learning and creative potential of former school dropouts. The paper argues that the pedagogy achieves this goal because it utilises principles of culturally responsive social, creative and emotional learning to promote student agency in learning.

## **Introduction**

The learning crisis in basic education in sub-Saharan Africa has been reported in several international studies that portray it as the failure of public schooling to provide quality education for all children (World Bank 2018). Solutions that have been prescribed have largely focused on reforming the school curriculum and teacher education to produce teachers who can adopt more child- or learner-centred instructional approaches. However, these reforms have consistently failed to live up to expectations in the African context, and yet continue to be an integral part of measures taken to improve education and learning outcomes in African schools. One explanation for the lack of impact is that learner-centred instructional practices are incongruent with the traditional culture of learning and instruction (Guthrie, 2011; Tabulawa 2013) – a culture that values intelligent imitation, observation, naturalistic exploration and building strong inter-personal relationships. What we witness in the typical African classroom, instead, is a coercive culture of learning that suppresses voice, self-expression and many of these important traditional values

(Sabates et al., 2010). Not much attention has been given to promoting learning environments where the development of social and emotional competences becomes an integral part of the learning experience. Rather, education reform programmes and policies focus more attention on cognitive skill development, with little recognition for how social and emotional competence can affect learning outcomes.

Research conducted in western contexts, suggest that education programmes that have strong social and emotional learning elements “can improve the overall quality of relationships between teachers, students, and peers in the classroom setting, students may be more likely to engage in classroom activities, listen to their teacher, and ask teachers and peers for help with academic tasks. These behaviors will likely support positive academic outcomes”. McCormick et al., (2015, p.2). In particular, evidence suggests they can enhance participation in learning for students from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds and improve their learning outcomes (McCormick et al., 2015; Payton et al., 2008). In sub-Saharan African contexts, not much research has explored how education programmes or interventions can utilize elements of social and emotional learning, in culturally appropriate ways, to enhance participation and improve learning for poor and disadvantaged students.

Payton et al., (2018, p.4) describe social and emotional learning as “the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to: recognize and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals; demonstrate caring and concern for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; make responsible decisions and; and handle interpersonal situations effectively”. In the African classroom environment these values, attitudes and skills do not receive much attention. This makes it difficult for many children, particularly from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, to learn as they encounter an unresponsive pedagogy, and an unfamiliar language of instruction that stifles their learning potential (Carter et al., 2020). Learning environments that develop social and emotional competence can remedy this and set children on a path to successful learning and achievement (McCormick et al., 2015). However, this idea is rarely raised in the international education development literature especially in relation to the learning crisis and how to address it. For example, the 2018 World Development Report makes three recommendations for dealing with the learning crisis, none of which remotely suggests that this is an important precursor. The report recommends that to tackle the learning crisis education systems should: “(a) assess learning to make it a serious goal, (b) act on evidence, to make schools work for learners, and (c) align actors, to make the system work for learning” (World Bank, 2018 p. 170). Whilst these have some merit in addressing the learning crisis, they overlook the importance of creating learning environments that develop social and emotional competence to improve learning.

Another issue is that, many children access education but do not benefit from schooling because they are silently excluded from the learning process (Lewin 2011). Inclusive instructional strategies adopt pedagogies that use social and emotional support as scaffolds to foster motivation, which many low-achieving students lack. Such strategies also create space for all learners to contribute to knowledge production (Molbaek 2018). Inclusive pedagogies also recognise that effective learning involves collaborative effort, which requires every child to participate (Florian et al., 2010). This in turn entails building confidence in one’s ability to voice ideas to co-create knowledge.

The high levels of school dropout in the early years of public schools in Africa suggest that many classroom environments are not creating opportunities to learn for many children, leading to significant dissatisfaction with schooling. Children and youth in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) make up about 35 percent of the world's out-of-school children and youth population (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2017; World Bank, 2018). According to UIS statistics, there are about 25.7 million out-of-school adolescents of lower secondary school age and about 34.4 million in the upper secondary school age in SSA. This translates to out-of-school rates of 34% for the 12–14 age group and 58% for the 15–17 age group (UIS, 2017). This is a large number of children who are unlikely to access dignified and fulfilling employment and escape inter-generational poverty (Dyer 2013). For this population, accelerated education programmes, often organized by NGOs, have provided a second chance to succeed in learning and progress in education. Many of these programmes incorporate emotional, social, relational and cultural aspects of learning, rooted in the learner's context and recognise the funds of knowledge that all children, irrespective of socio-economic background, bring to the classroom (Longden 2013). Many of them create collaborative cultures of learning using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction to produce a greater sense of shared responsibility for learning. This is missing in many African public primary school classrooms.

Accelerated education programmes frequently make claims for a different form of pedagogy (Longden 2013). In this paper, we discuss one such programme, the Speed Schools in Ethiopia, also known locally as Accelerated Learning for Africa (ALFA). After a brief introduction to the Ethiopian context, the paper describes and analyses the pedagogy, drawing from empirical research that explored the impact of the programme on learning outcomes (Akyeampong et al., 2018). However, the paper focuses mainly on how the pedagogy includes principles of social and emotional learning to improve the learning experiences of out-of-school students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## **Dropping out of primary school in Ethiopia**

As in many developing countries, school dropout is a major issue in Ethiopia. Jennings and Poppe (2012) find that dropout rates are highest in grade 1, higher in rural areas than urban, higher among boys in all grades, and particularly high among pastoralist children. Higher rates of primary dropout are also associated with short shift days rather than full days, high Pupil Teacher Ratios and low availability of textbooks. Gross enrolment in the last grade of primary – a proxy for primary completion – increased from 21% in 1999 to 52% in 2008 (UIS Statistics in Brief, 2010). Ravishankar et al. (2010) indicate that half the primary education resources being deployed are for pupils who drop out before completing eight years of primary education. Despite the recent growth in enrolment, children are falling behind their expected grade and progression through school continues to be a major problem (DFID 2016).

In addition to efforts that have resulted in increasing levels of access to education in Ethiopia, recent policy initiatives have attempted to improve quality. These have included moving towards more child or learner-centred teaching, improving school quality and supporting teachers. Teachers have been supported to include more learner-centred teaching methods and introduce 'real-world' examples in exercises (Frost and Little, 2014). Frost and Little's analysis of children's activities in 776 Ethiopian primary school classes shows however, that most of the teaching is still conducted through teacher-centred methods and caution that the terms 'child-centred' and 'teacher-centred' are often poorly defined and understood and can be very weak proxies for what is happening in the class and inside children's

minds. In effect, policy initiatives to improve learning and reduce risk of dropping out of school through pedagogical reforms may not be achieving the desired outcomes. The Speed School programme appears to offer a window of opportunity to address this challenge.

## **The Speed Schools in Ethiopia**

The Speed School (SS) programme in Ethiopia was established 2011 through the efforts of Geneva Global<sup>1</sup>. This is an international consulting company that manages development projects on behalf of philanthropic organizations, though the SS programme was developed by local staff. In each woreda (district) where the Speed Schools operate a different, locally based development NGO is contracted as the implementing partner (IP). The IP appoints a training officer (TO) and community mobilizers (CM) who then make contact with local school authorities and communities in order to identify children in the age range 9–14 who have never been to school or who have dropped out in the early grades. In each location, these children are placed in classes of 25 with a balance of boys and girls and according to their home language which is then used in the classes. Alongside the Speed School classes, the programme offers three more elements. The mothers of the selected children are required to join a self-help group which uses microfinance principles to assist them in supporting their child through the Speed School and beyond, and which is supported by the local government. It also introduces a school readiness programme for younger children based on the child-to-child approach with upper primary school students. Finally, links are created with the primary schools that will receive the Speed School graduates and some training is offered to teachers there (Akyeampong et al., 2016a; Akyeampong et al., 2018)

The one-year Speed School curriculum focuses on literacy (in home language, Amharic and English), numeracy skills and environmental sciences, in grades 1 to 3. The content of the curriculum is rooted in the Ethiopian National Curriculum and its Minimum Learning Competencies (MLCs) and the government textbook for each grade and subject is a key reference for facilitators. The graduates of the programme are expected to pursue formal education in government primary schools from grade 3 or 4, after passing a placement examination prepared in collaboration with the woreda education office. Teaching is done by facilitators who are recruited locally on a one-year contract, though most are re-employed the following year. The minimum qualification for teaching in a Speed School is successful completion of grade 10 (junior secondary) and three weeks of intensive training, followed by frequent school-level professional development support. Training is experiential, with facilitators working in groups for creative learning activities, but with a strong emphasis on lesson planning which will cover the curriculum using the distinctive Speed School pedagogy. Significantly, learning about the students' socioeconomic backgrounds generates in facilitators a reconceptualisation of who the students are and their right to learn in safe, kind and conducive environments. The Speed School Training Handbook, for example, stipulates that any student 'mis'-behaviour should be understood as emanating from the teachers' failure to engage the child, or caused by the school infrastructure (lack of water or pleasant latrines) or the child's circumstances such as hunger, ill health or family issues, rather than as emanating within the child themselves. Facilitators are expected to work a minimum of 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week. The teaching day comprises seven lessons running from 8 to 5 pm, with a one hour forty-minute lunch break and four

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<sup>1</sup> From 2016 the Luminos Fund (<https://luminosfund.org/>) took on Geneva Global role in managing the growth of Speed Schools in Ethiopia

hours of lessons on Saturday mornings. Students' attendance is high, and they are assessed continuously through careful monitoring and recording of their oral and written responses and the year culminates in a month-long revision period before the placement examination. Operating since 2011/12 in the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), some 3.7 million children have been through the Speed School programme, with 96% of them integrating into a local government primary school (Akyeampong et al., 2016b).

## **The Impact of Speed Schools**

An initial impact evaluation study conducted after the programme had been introduced (Akyeampong et al., 2012) concluded that Speed School graduates in the first cohorts were remarkably successful in completing the programme and transitioning to government schools. Students interviewed said that teaching and learning in Speed Schools was much better than in government schools and that they had a better understanding than their peers who started in mainstream public schools. There may be many other reasons for this, but the claims made for the distinctive SS pedagogy are especially salient.

To study the educational trajectories of former Speed School students from 2011 effectively, Akyeampong and his colleagues (2018) compared educational performance between Speed School students and comparison groups in two types of government schools: the first type called 'Link' schools simply because they were the designated public schools that were expected to enroll students who had completed Speed Schools (many Speed Schools were also located in the same compounds as Link Schools); the second group were government schools that did not receive any Speed School completers.

Students from Speed Schools were matched with students from the two types of government schools based on age and gender. To achieve a matching sample, students in the two types of schools were selected from Grades 1 to 4 of primary school. In matching the three samples, it was important to ensure that all the students shared similar characteristics. The Speed School students were a self-selected group because they were already enrolled in Speed Schools in 2011, but they were students who had dropped out from grades 1 to 4. To ensure that the two comparison groups had similar characteristics, teachers from these schools helped to identify students with high risk factors – attending irregularly or underperforming relative to other students in the same grade. Selecting students from Grades 1 to 4 of same ages as students in Speed Schools also meant that many were overage, although the age and grade of students were already factors considered in the selection of students.

Using a household survey and achievement tests, the research focused on three diverse but interrelated long-term outcomes of the Speed School accelerated learning program: namely, school attainment, academic performance, and attitudes towards learning and further education. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the impact of the Speed School program on progression and primary completion rates of former Speed School students compared to students who had attended government schools?
2. What are the attitudes to learning and education for former Speed School students compared to students who had attended government schools?

3. What is the impact of the Speed School program on the learning outcomes of former students compared to other students who had attended government schools?

The study found that of all the former Speed School students tracked, about 75% were still in school compared to 61% of tracked Link School students who had not attended the Speed School and 66% of those in other government schools. The 75% retention rate of Speed School graduates suggests that most of them had persisted in their education. They also had higher aspirations to progress beyond primary education, and by the time they reached lower secondary, were less likely to drop out compared to government school students. Another important finding was that Speed School graduates performed consistently better than the two control group students (Government and Link schools) for all three subjects – math, Sidama<sup>2</sup> and English. For example, Speed School graduates scored 10.4% (math), 13.5% (Sidama) and 7.4% (English) more points than their government school counterparts – a result which was statistically significant. The study also found that Speed School students who dropped out of government school still attained higher scores on the achievement tests than government school students who had also dropped out. Akyeampong et al., (2018) argued that this was indicative of the residual benefits of the Speed School programme, especially the contribution from the pedagogy used. In offering an explanation, the researchers carrying out a qualitative study of the classrooms and teacher training (Akyeampong et al. 2016) argued that, because Speed School students become accustomed to an active involvement in lessons, this develops their confidence to participate in lessons and their ability to learn even in the less interactive environments of government schools (Akyeampong et al., 2018).

### **Speed School Pedagogy and Social and Emotional Learning**

The learning environment in Speed Schools takes most children from not recognising letters to reading passages of text in just 10 months, a requirement for their placement in the Link schools (Akyeampong et al, 2018). It celebrates traditional, five-senses learning methods, leverages the best of global research into pedagogy for marginalized children, and helps children become intrinsic learners (Akyeampong et al., 2016b; Akyeampong et al, 2018). Its inclusive, participatory pedagogy instills confidence and resilience in students in their capacity as learners, which is an enabler for academic success in Speed Schools and beyond. A characterisation of the Speed School pedagogy encompasses the assemblage of values and behaviours that produce inclusive classroom practices. It promotes greater collaboration in knowledge construction, linguistic expression and learner contribution to curriculum content, in ways that appear to awaken and sustain the ability to learn among poor and marginalized children.

To understand why the Speed School programme improved learning outcomes for disadvantaged, out of school children, it is important to look closely at its learning environment and contrast it with traditional learning environments in public schools in Ethiopia. A few striking features emerge. First, the variety and complexity of student talk in the Speed School classrooms is unusual. Students talk while taking part in teachers' whole class interactive teaching of new content in the first 15 minutes of the lesson, in group activities, in presentations, answering questions, writing on the board and reflecting on the lesson. It is not uncommon to see students initiate dialogue with teachers and with peers during group and individual work. Almost all students show confidence in speaking publicly and asking questions of their teachers as

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<sup>2</sup> This was the main language in all the schools in this study.

well as each other (Akyeampong et al., 2018). There is also a collective sense of responsibility among the students within their groups: students who are late to class or disruptive apologize to their classmates rather than to the teacher.

Students' engagement in discussion and collaboration over common activities in group work is central to how the pedagogy is actualised, physically embodied by students being grouped in the same stable, mixed gender and ability groups of five, facing one another, for every lesson. At a deeper level, the pedagogy in action entails a process by which the students and their teachers learn to maintain positive relationships to develop trust and a safe space to learn. Through self/group-awareness of responsibility it enables a conducive environment for all to learn. Research from western contexts shows that a caring and safe school climate fosters students' social and emotional learning and that a school full of socially and emotionally competent students contributes to a positive school climate (O'Conner et al., 2018). Interestingly, this applies in the Speed School classroom even with relatively untrained teachers.

The pedagogy makes a strong appeal to students to become active learners. Within a framework set by the teacher, in group work and reporting back, students take some control over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of their work. Each group is tasked with relearning and re-presenting to the rest of the class the content of the lesson initially presented by teachers. This is done through a medium that is reflected in the names of the groups ('Music Group, 'Handicraft Group' or 'Storytelling group. 'This means that, with very limited resources and only one textbook available that the teacher refers to, students nevertheless creatively make use of locally sourced materials such as grain stalks or coloured card or chalk diagrams and pictures chalked on the concrete classroom floor as integral parts of their presentations, or make up songs about dividing numbers or present short role plays on 'The Family'. An important hallmark of the pedagogy is the importance it places on individual and group thinking, and the sharing and verbalisation of knowledge, as the precursor to the creative group presentations. This creates an atmosphere in which all learners are involved in class, group and individual activities. The activities specified and the social relations generated by the pedagogy ensure that students engage in a very wide range of learning talk and develop their ideas with the teacher and with peers, in groups and to the whole class (Akyeampong et al., 2016a; Akyeampong et al., 2018).

This description of the Speed School pedagogy places it clearly as a learner-centred, competence model pedagogy. Alexander (2008:112) on the basis of his comparative study across different cultural contexts, claims that what is most crucial in promoting effective learning is a pedagogy that enables students to engage in different kinds of learning talk: narrate; explain; instruct; ask different kinds of question; receive, act and build upon answers; analyse and solve problems; speculate and imagine; explore and evaluate ideas; discuss; argue, reason and justify; negotiate. All of these are present in the Speed School classrooms, where group work and reporting back give opportunities for extended talk (Akyeampong et al., 2018). Thus, the pedagogy, far from being individualistic, lays emphasis on the collective in the way that learning tasks are set, carried out and reported. This produces more symmetrical, less authoritarian social relations between teachers and students, which are beneficial to learning.



## Discussion and conclusions

The researchers who studied the Speed School pedagogy suggested that it went beyond the simple application of a methodology to improve basic literacy and numeracy competence. They argued that Speed School students – accustomed to learning environments that placed value on their active contributions to learning – used the confidence gained from attending Speed Schools to participate actively in lessons in government public schools. The pedagogy affirmed and extended the students' identities and enabled them to develop skills in collaborative critical inquiry. They were able to use this to repurpose their previously unsuccessful learning experiences in public schools to achieve more meaningful and lasting learning outcomes. The basic elements of the Speed School pedagogy are its emphasis on developing reading skills (four times as many hours than in government public schools); extensive use of formative assessment; using local languages to access and construct knowledge, and in the process, develop critical consciousness and cognitive competence – what the researchers termed 'learning how to learn'; and, finally, creative practical applications that invite the learners to draw on their cultural knowledge and experiences (Akyeampong et al., 2018). The pedagogy can be described as inclusive because of the ample opportunities it provides every child to express their knowledge/understanding and receive collective support from peers and teachers to attain learning goals. Each contribution is equally valued and the responsibility for learning and developing understanding becomes a shared one.

The argument from research on social and emotional learning is that "social–emotional competencies serve as both protective and promotive factors that can help children develop healthy coping and problem-solving skills" (Eklund et al., 2018, p.317). If the Speed School pedagogy was effective only within the inclusive learning environment it creates, then Speed School graduates who transition into public schools where the pedagogy is demonstrably different should regress in their learning. However, this appears not to happen (Akyeampong et al., 2016b). When Akyeampong et al., (2018) tracked Speed School graduates in public schools, it was clear that the learning environment differed sharply. The identities and roles of teacher and learner were clearly separated, as were the spaces they occupied in the classroom. The pedagogy focused on finding a solution to problems defined and set by the teacher, and there was very little choice for students as the teacher sought to remain in control of the whole learning process. Yet, Speed School graduates in these learning environments seemed to thrive and outperform non-Speed School students (Akyeampong et al., 2018). Akyeampong and colleagues (2016b) argue that essentially the learning environment in Speed Schools promotes social and emotional competence especially in the area of self-management of learning which draws on skills developed in Speed School classrooms to sustain the gains they have made. Paradoxically, the one year in a Speed School was a better preparation for success in the later grades of public schools than three years in their earlier grades. Moreover, it is precisely the exclusive nature of the pedagogy in government schools that brings this effect into being (Akyeampong et al., 2016b).

Descriptions of pedagogy frequently involve drawing unhelpful binary distinctions. On the one hand, some approaches are labelled variously as learner-centred, progressivist, or competence model pedagogies, whose adherents claim that they accord better with currently accepted constructivist theories of learning and directly foster aspirations for students who are autonomous, agentic and democratic. They contrast this with teacher-centred, formalist and performance models of pedagogy, which are not only associated

with discredited transmission and behaviourist theories of learning, but involve authoritarian teachers in the creation of passive, dependent and uncritical students, the subjects associated with colonialism (Dei 2004; Harber 2004). On the other hand, there are those who argue that formalism is not synonymous with authoritarianism and that teacher-centred pedagogy makes it possible to organize an orderly class when there are few resources and large numbers of students. Progressivist and formalist pedagogies 'constitute diametrically opposed worldviews': the former is focused on producing the individualistic neoliberal subject of the Global North and therefore in Africa is neo-colonial and culturally alien to both African teachers and learners, who together ensure that no matter what is prescribed in curricula, the pedagogy remains teacher-centred (Tabulawa 2003:643). This means that although progressivist pedagogy may be possible in principle it is not necessarily 'probable, viable or desirable' (Hugo and Wedekind 2013:154). As a result, in pedagogical reviews, accounts of successful learner-centred pedagogy in SSA are missing (Westbrook et al. 2014). Similarly, Schweisfurth (2013:430) suggests that full learner-centred pedagogy may be 'either inappropriate to particular contexts, or simply too challenging to implement'.

The Speed School pedagogy, we believe, is non-binary, in that it integrates 'newer pedagogies with more traditional ones' (Westbrook et al. 2014, p.37) and evokes in learners a sense of confidence in their ability to learn as it is able to create an environment that is non-threatening and invites every learner to draw on their cultural knowledge, ideas and experiences to learn. It will be inadequate to therefore describe the pedagogy as essentially learner-centred, although it bears similar characteristics. The difference lies in its ability to re-ignite the joy of learning - and, for the facilitators, of teaching - by using learning activities such as games, drama, music, etc. to make social and emotional learning the central ingredient in learning. The pedagogy retains some teacher-centred features, for example in the way in which teachers introduce the lesson using mainly one textbook to set the agenda after which students move quickly to progressive learning modes allowing them freedom to investigate and co-construct knowledge. However, more research is needed to measure how the Speed School pedagogy achieves this at scale and with larger pupil-teacher ratios and to understand more deeply the mechanics of how it improves learning from the perspective and experiences of learners.

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